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FEATHER MANTLES OF CALIFORNIA

By CHARLES C. WILLOUGHBY

FROM the narratives of early explorers of the region now known as the United States we learn that the Indians from Massachusetts to California made elaborate mantles or blankets of feathers. Some had patterns in brilliant colors; many were made of the iridescent feathers of the wild turkey; others were wrought from feathers of the swan, mallard, goose, and other waterfowl.

These mantles fall naturally into two groups. In the first, the shafts of the feathers were fastened to a netted or woven fabric, the feathers overlapping one another as in nature. These blankets must have borne a close resemblance to the feather garments of Peru, and also to the mantles of pigeon feathers made by the Maori of New Zealand. The best Indian blankets of this group were probably of as good workmanship as is shown in the celebrated feather capes of the Hawaiian Islanders. Mantles with overlapping feathers were in use in California, also over a considerable portion of the Great Central Basin, and eastward to the Atlantic Coast. Du Pratz describes them as follows:

With the thread which they obtain from the bark of the bass tree they make for themselves a kind of mantle which they cover with the finest swan feathers fastened on this cloth one by one, a long piece of work in truth, but they account their pains and time as nothing when they want to satisfy themselves

The feather mantles are worked on a frame similar to that on which wig makers work hair. They lay out the feathers in the same manner and fasten them to old fish nets or old mulberry-bark mantles. They place them in the manner already outlined one over another and on both sides. For this purpose they make use of little turkey feathers. The women who can obtain feathers of the swan or Indian duck make mantles of them for the women of the Honored class.¹

It is doubtful if a good example of this extensive group of feather garments made by our northern Indians is in existence

¹ Du Pratz, *Hist. de La Louisiane*, II, 191-192, 1758.

today. Among the Pomo, Yuki, Wintun, Wailaki, Mewok, northern Maidu, and probably other California tribes, a degenerate form of this type, specimens of which are in the Peabody Museum, is still used in dances. They are, however, very coarsely made of large feathers, and probably bear but a slight resemblance to the better examples of older work.²

The second group of feather mantles was found throughout the cliff-house region, also in California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and probably in other sections. The blankets of this group are woven, and they may be divided into three subdivisions according to the manner of using the feathers.

In the first and most primitive subdivision, the downy skins of young waterfowl or the feathered skins of the more mature birds were cut into strips, twisted, and used as warp cords, or they were wrapped about warp cords of fiber which were then joined in simple twined weaving. The construction was the same as in the more common type of rabbit-skin blankets which are so widely distributed. This form of feather blanket is rare in collections. There is a good specimen from the Koskimo in the Peabody Museum. They were also made by the Chinook, are reported by Dr. Dixon to have been woven by the northern Maidu, and were doubtless once used over a considerable area. They are of a coarse texture but warm. Very old examples of this work in the Peabody Museum are also shown in the feather borders of the rabbit-skin blankets from the graves of the ancient Basket-makers.

In the second subdivision of group two, the webs are stripped from the larger feathers of various birds and wrapped around the warp cords before weaving. The best blankets made in this way are handsome, warm, and durable. They were used by the Cliff-dwellers, evidently also by the Maidu of the Sacramento Valley, and probably by other tribes. Two excellent examples of this type are illustrated in Plate IV.

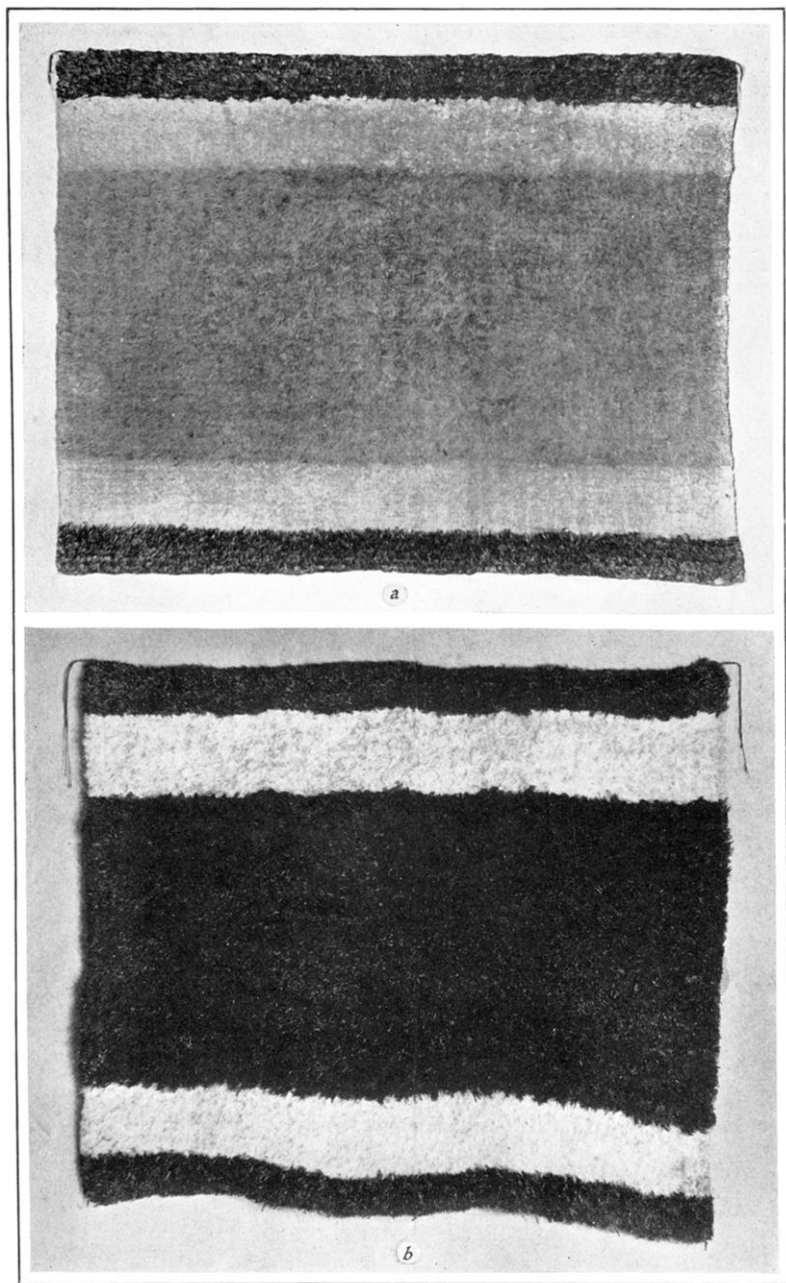
In the third subdivision, the down of waterfowl is mixed with dog hair, or mountain goat wool, before spinning, or is caught

² For typical examples of these coarse dance capes see R. B. Dixon, *Bulletin, Am. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, vol. xvii, pls. xl, xli, and fig. 24.

into strands of this material during the process of spinning. Very attractive blankets were woven of the fluffy cordage thus prepared. These were made by some of the tribes of Washington and British Columbia.

The blanket illustrated in Plate IV, b, undoubtedly made by the Maidu Indians of the Sacramento Valley, California, belongs to the second subdivision of group two. It was given to the Peabody Museum of Harvard University in 1913 by Miss Lucy H. Eaton of Boston in memory of her sister, Catherine S. Eaton, whose death occurred a short time previous to the gift. It was obtained in California about the year 1821, by William Alden Gale. Mr. Gale sailed as clerk on the *Albatross* from Boston to California in 1810, remaining on the coast as agent for Bryant and Sturges, Boston, until 1835. He gave the blanket, several fine old Chumashan baskets, and other ethnological specimens which he had collected in California, to the family of his friend, Joseph B. Eaton, whose daughter, above mentioned, presented it to the Museum.

It measures about 50 x 56 inches. Its technic is shown in Fig. 50. The material from which the cordage is made appears to be Indian hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*) throughout. The double woof cords (a, a) are suspended at intervals of about an inch from a finely pleated cord (b), the ends of which are carefully tapered. A cross-section of this cord approaches a triangle. Each of the three faces is shown in the drawing. The warp cords (c) are double, are not twisted together, and are closely wrapped with webs of feathers which have been stripped from their shafts. The method of winding and lashing the two cords together is shown in d. This double feather-covered warp cord is carried back and forth the length of the blanket, and is held in place by the double woof cords in a variety of twined weaving, the technic of which is similar to the wrapped twined weaving of Mason, excepting that both strands of the double woof cords are equally pliable and appear alike on either side of the blanket. Each strand of this twisted cord crosses the warp cords continuously on one side of the blanket only, not alternately as in the cliff-house



FEATHER MANTLES PROBABLY MADE BY THE MAIDU INDIANS OF THE SACRAMENTO VALLEY
a, American Museum of Natural History; *b*, Peabody Museum of Harvard University.

blankets. In this way a closer, firmer texture is produced, and the garment is much more serviceable than the cliff-house mantles.

The lower edge is finished as shown in e. The ends of the two strands of twisted woof cord are tied below the last warp cords in a square knot. One of them is then looped upon itself and wrapped several times with its companion, which is then carried through the loop at its lower end and knotted. The end

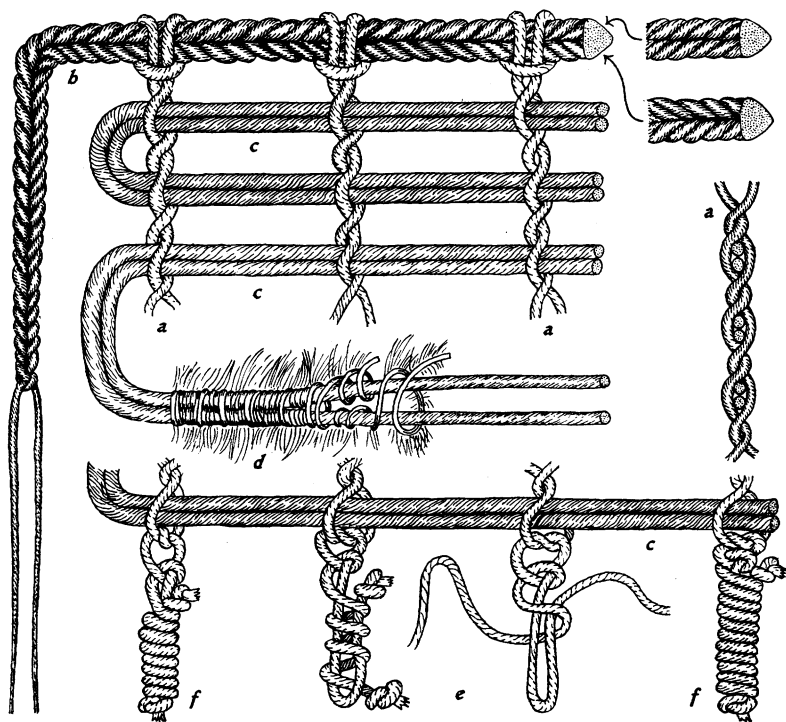


FIG. 50.—Details showing construction of mantle figured in Pl. IV, b.

of the first strand is also knotted close to the first wrapping, and the ends of the two strands cut close to the knots. When finished these pendent cords appear as in f.

The feathers used in the body and in the upper and lower borders of this garment are webs stripped from the wing coverts of the mallard duck. Those used in the white stripes are doubtless also from some species of waterfowl.

The work shown in this garment is of higher grade than that of the cliff-house blankets, dilapidated fragments of which are in our collections.

In the National Museum at Washington is a very close duplicate of the blanket described above. It has the same light stripes across a dark ground, and is apparently made of feathers from the same species of waterfowl. It was collected by the Wilkes Expedition, and is attributed in the old catalogue of the Museum to the region of northern Washington or Straits of Juan de Fuca, for the reason apparently that it bears a superficial resemblance to blankets of hair and bird down known to have been obtained there by Wilkes. If we turn to chapter five of the fifth volume of the United States Exploring Expedition, however, we learn that Captain Wilkes sent the *Vincennes* to San Francisco in the summer of 1841. On the 20th of August, Lieutenant Commandant Ringgold with six boats and an Indian pilot left the ship for an expedition up the Sacramento River. On August 29, three days' journey above the junction of Feather River with the Sacramento, they reached a Maidu village, of which a good description is given. This is probably the first published account of the habitations of this people. Ringgold states that some of the Indians

had feathers in their hair arranged in different ways . . . Their fillets of feathers somewhat resembled those worn by the chiefs at the Sandwich Island; and feather cloaks were seen at the village resembling some we had seen in the north near the Straits of De Fuca.³

The ethnological specimens collected by the Wilkes Expedition are among the most valued objects in our older eastern museums. The collections were extensive and comprise many rare objects from the Pacific Islands and western America. It seems more than probable, therefore, that the feather blanket in the National Museum, which is a duplicate of the one previously obtained in California by Mr. Gale and now in the Peabody Museum, came from this Maidu village.

The third blanket of this kind known to the writer is illustrated in Plate IV, *a*. It is in the American Museum of New York. It

³ Charles Wilkes, United States Exploring Expedition, vol. v, p. 185, (Lea and Blanchard, 1845 Edition).

was purchased from Mr. W. A. Hooton of Brooklyn, New York, in 1914, in whose family it had been since 1830, "at which time it was purchased either in Mexico or California." It was undoubtedly obtained in the latter locality. The stripes have the same arrangement as in the two blankets above described, but the broad central band is in gray feathers instead of mottled black. The National Museum and the Peabody Museum blankets are both new, but the American Museum example is somewhat soiled and shows wear. All three were probably made by the Maidu, and the workmanship shown is of excellent quality. They undoubtedly represent the highest grade of this class of featherwork.

PEABODY MUSEUM,
HARVARD UNIVERSITY,
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.